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AUTHOR Knecht, Richard J.
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ABSTRACT

James E. Murdoch's contributions to the arts were widely diversified. Aside from acting, the man was interested in both the practical and theoretical aspects of elocution. The thread of continuity which existed between elocution and interpretation became apparent to Murdoch through his analysis of the works of Sheridan, Walker, and Rush, the earlier elocutionists. Murdoch drew upon previous ideologies in order to formulate his own theory of elocution. Combined with his own terminology and the modified philosophies of his predecessors, Murdoch was able to devise an "eclectic" approach to the teaching of elocution. The purpose of this paper was to evaluate and demonstrate that Murdoch's "eclectic" method does have an important bearing upon the present day technique of teaching oral interpretation. An analysis of "A Plea For Spoken Language" and "Analytic Elocution," written by Murdoch, shows that teachers today are still using the principles which were set down over almost 125 years ago by a forgotten man in the history of interpretation. (Contains 16 notes.) (Author/RS)

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JAMES E. MURDOCH: A FORGOTTEN CONTRIBUTOR TO THE ART OF ORAL INTERPRETATION

Western States Communication Association
Hyatt Regency
Vancouver, BC

RICHARD J. KNECHT

Professor of Communication
Department of Communication
The University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio

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R. Knecht

ABSTRACT

JAMES E. MURDOCH: A FORGOTTEN CONTRIBUTOR TO THE ART OF ORAL INTERPRETATION

James E. Murdoch's contributions to the arts were widely diversified. Aside from acting, the man was interested in both the practical and theoretical aspects of elocution. The thread of continuity which existed between elocution and interpretation became apparent to Murdoch through his analysis of the works of Sheridan, Walker, and Rush, the earlier elocutionists.

Murdoch drew upon previous ideologies in order to formulate his own theory of elocution. Combined with his own terminology and the modified philosophies of his predecessors, Murdoch was able to devise an "eclectic" approach to the teaching of elocution.

The purpose of this paper was to evaluate and demonstrate that Murdoch's "eclectic" method does have an important bearing upon the present day technique of teaching oral interpretation. An analysis of A Plea For Spoken Language and Analytic Elocution, written by Murdoch, shows that teachers today are still using the principles which were set down over almost one hundred and twenty-five (125) years ago by a forgotten man in the history of interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

One of America's most celebrated readers and generally admired actors, James E. Murdoch, 1811-1893, lived by the maxim "Always look for the Reason." His key to success in life was a firm conviction in this simple adage. Not only did his professional career exemplify this motto, but his personal life as well was one of sound reasoning.

James E. Murdoch's contributions to the arts were widely diversified. His acting ability was comparable to that of any other tragedian or comedian between the years of 1845 to 1860. Reviews given by fellow actors, stage-managers, and critics of the time more than substantiate this point. Murdoch, just as many other actors during their careers, engaged in dramatic recitations. His competence in this field was aided by the invaluable instruction of Dr. James Rush. The amount of recognition which he received for his patriotic readings, during the Civil War, was well deserved. The work was done on a voluntary basis and receipts taken from the performances were donated to comforting the sick and wounded, who had engaged in fighting for the Northern cause.

A twenty-eight (28) year period of semi-retirement gave Murdoch the time and opportunity to write in a reflective manner upon his career, former actors, and to clarify several principles of elocution. The theories of elocution which were defined by such men as Sheridan, Walker, and Rush had been misinterpreted by some of their respective followers and needed this clarification.

Although he did not wish to be known as an originator of a theory in elocution, he did combine the theories of both the natural and mechanical schools, and adopted exercises for practice. He had not only clarified his former instructor's definition of the "elements" but had added original terminology of his own. Effusive, expulsive, and explosive forms of breathing were to be utilized in helping to relate the emotion conveyed in a poem. The forms of breathing were not merely an artificial device, but a means of achieving a desired effect.

Having read the works of Sheridan and Walker, the early elocutionists, Murdoch was able to combine ideas from both the natural and mechanical schools of thought without going to the extremes that either had prescribed. Along with this synthesis of ideas Murdoch incorporated the teachings of Dr. Rush, and clarified them to the extent that they could be understood by all who read A Plea For Spoken Language and its companion Analytic Elocution. This combination and assimilation of philosophies gave vent to a new approach in teaching elocution. Its boundaries were not as rigid as those of preceding ideologies and the flexibility which it afforded to a reader was unique in that it was "eclectic".

FINDINGS

Murdoch's writings were to furnish the groundwork for a practical form of elocution. He did not wish to be known as an originator of a theory or a system of elocution. Murdoch claimed that he had found the right way to put into practice what Rush had theorized in The Philosophy of the Human Voice.[1] A simplification of Rush's treatise by Murdoch made the art of elocution more intelligible to a greater number of people interested in the field.

Rush had listed the five elements of the voice and had vaguely defined them.

> The terms by which the Quality or kind of voice is distinguished are rough, smooth, harsh, full, thin, soft, musical, and some others of the same metaphorical structure.
>
> For the specification of Force we use the words strong, weak, feeble, loud, soft, forcible, and faint. Time, in the art of speaking, is subdivided into long, short, quick, slow, and rapid.
>
> I employ the term Abruptness to signify the sudden and full discharge of a sound, as contradistinguished from its more gradual emission. The variations of Pitch are denoted by the words rise and fall, high and low.[2]

Murdoch was not completely satisfied with the general classifications of the "elements" of voice made by Rush. In Analytic Elocution he wished to give a more concrete definition of quality, force, time, abruptness, and pitch.

> Pitch is the primary element of effect and significance in speech, and may, in all its varieties be brought under the command of the organs for the purposes of art.
>
> Quality is defined under the divisions of natural, aspirated, falsetto, pectoral, guttural, and the improved quality the "orotund."
>
> Force is a term used to designate the power, energy or intensity with which a sound is uttered. The different forms of its specific application are exhibited in what is called "stress, or the application of force to certain parts or the whole of the extent of a syllable.
>
> Abruptness is the suddenness, combined with "a greater or less degree" of fullness, with which every syllabic sound may be opened. It may vary from the most delicate, but clear opening of a syllable, to its most violent or forcible explosion.
>
> Time is the duration or measure of sound. With regard to individual syllables, it is called quantity, and means the duration of sound heard on each, - as the long quantity or short quantity of a syllable. When the simple term quantity is employed, long quantity is understood.[3]

Murdoch drew upon these five elements of voice in order to define elocution. He believed that the act of employing quality, pitch, force, time, and abruptness conveyed the sense, sentiment, and compassion of composition in the fullest and most natural manner, and at the same time gave the greatest satisfaction to the ear.[4] In doing this, he was merely trying to show that the mental and vocal relationships explained by Rush were more intimate and more easily traceable than were first supposed by the student who read The Philosophy of the Human Voice.[5]

Rush's description of the human mind and its transmitting of emotions was rather complicated and could not be completely understood by the majority of people who read the book.

> The human mind is the place of representation of all the existence's of nature which are brought within the scope of the senses. These representations are called ideas. These ideas are the simple passive pictures of things; or they exist with an activity, capable of so affecting the physical organs as to induce us to seek the continuance of that which produces them; or to avoid it. The active or vivid class of ideas, comprehends the passions. The function of the mind here described, exist in different forms and degrees, from the simple idea, to the highest energy of passion: and the terms, thought, sentiment, emotion, feeling and passion are but the verbal signs of these degrees and forms.[6]

Murdoch tried to simplify this tenet of belief held by Rush, when he stated that through the employment of spoken language the mind was able to express its various states and conditions. He asseverated that what passed through the mind was either in the form of ideas or emotions. According to Murdoch, ideas encompassed all the simple perceptions or thoughts. Emotions were defined as being all the effects produced upon the mind by ideas, whether they were calm feelings resulting from the imagination or the states of violent mental agitation arising from the strongest passions.[7] Conclusions drawn from the previous statements would mean that studying the constituent elements of pitch, quality, force, abruptness, and time along with scientific principles would make it possible for the voice to declare any state of thought, sentiment, or passion from the mind. In order to achieve this proficiency in the art of elocution, Murdoch stated that it was necessary to practice and perform vocal exercises.

Preparation for a dramatic recitation could be taken from the following directions:

1. Attitude of the Body, and Position of the Organs

Place yourself in a perfectly erect, but easy posture; the weight of the body resting on one foot; the feet at a moderate distance, the one in advance of the other; the arms akimbo: the fingers pressing on the abdominal muscles, in front and the thumbs on the dorsal muscles, on each side of the spine; the chest freely expanded and fully projected; the shoulders held backward and downward; the head perfectly vertical.

2. Exercises in Deep Breathing

Having thus complied with the preliminary conditions of a free and unembarrassed action of the organs, draw in and give out the breath very fully, and very slowly, about a dozen times in succession. Let the breathing be deep and tranquil, but such as to cause the chest to rise fully, and fall freely at every effort.

3. Exercise in "Effusive," or Tranquil Breathing

Draw in a very full breath, and send it forth in a prolonged sound of the letter "h."[8] In the act of inspiration, take in as much breath as you can, and give out as little as possible, - merely sufficient to keep the sound of "h" audible. But keep it going on as long as you can sustain it. In this style of respiration, the breath merely effuses itself into the surrounding air.

4. Exercise in "Expulsive," or forcible Breathing

Draw in a very full breath, as before, and emit it, with a lively expulsive force, in the sound of "h", but little prolonged, - in the style of a moderate whispered cough. The breath, in the style of expiration, is projected into the air. Repeat this exercise, as directed, in the statement preceding.

5. Exercise in "Explosive", or abrupt Breathing

Draw in a breath, as already directed, and emit it with a sudden and violent explosion, in a very brief sound of the letter "h", - in the style of an abrupt and forcible, but whispered cough. The breath is in this mode of expiration, thrown out with abrupt violence. Repeat this exercise, as before directed.[9]

These exercises were believed to be merely an exemplification of natural breathing, slightly exaggerated, as they would have been done by necessity of energetic or impassioned utterance.[10]

Before attempting to achieve perfection in a dramatic recitation, it would be necessary to have control of breath, inhalation and expiration, learned from the previously mentioned exercises; and a complete understanding of the terminology employed. Alan H. Monroe, in Principles and Types of Speech, continued to use the same expressions first originated by Murdoch. [11]

> If force is applied gradually and firmly, in what is called the effusive form, it suggests deep but controlled sentiment; generally effusive form is used to express grandeur, dignity, reverence and the like. When expulsive form is used, force is applied firmly but more rapidly and energetically; this form is used to express decisiveness, vigor, and earnestness. The sudden and explosive form of applying force suggests violent or uncontrolled feeling; it is associated with extreme anger, sudden fear, or other strong emotions that burst out abruptly. [12]

With the comprehension of the basic principles of breath control and a knowledge of the elements of voice, the mind was able to express ideas and to convey emotions. Murdoch thought the best way to capture this skill was the practice of reading aloud selections which expressed a definite feeling or several feelings.

He did not believe that vocal practice was an end in itself, but a means of achieving a certain effect. Without practice and a response to the ideas communicated from the printed page, mere mechanical management of the "elements" of voice would emit only an artificial sound. [13]

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Murdoch's convictions classified him among the first "theorists" to use the eclectic method. He realized the worth of the contributions made by Sheridan's "natural" school, Walker's "mechanical" school, and Rush's definitions and descriptions. He tried to modify and combine the theories of the past into one philosophy.

> Ease and grace of execution in any art, that of speech among the rest, can come only from a disciplined practice, founded upon a correct knowledge of the principles of the art, and under the guidance of an educated taste.
>
> In the first place, it is false to suppose that, because the voice is a natural gift, we must leave its development to nature alone or unaided. Like most natural gifts, it comes to us with marvelous capacity for improvement, and the full expansion of its powers depends upon their intelligent exercise. A knowledge drawn from a correct observation of the working powers of the speaking voice, enables the speaker to discipline his organs to a fitting obedience to the dictates of his will and

> the prompting of his mental powers, in giving vocal impress and character to the language he deals with, whether poetic or matter-of-fact, premeditated or extempore.[14]

Murdoch had tried to modify and combine the theories of Sheridan, Walker, and Rush without going to extremes. He stressed the importance of the blending of nature and vocal mechanics to reproduce the "emotions" as they were conveyed to an audience by a reader.

Murdoch believed that perfection in the art of elocution was achieved through the skillful blending of nature and the suggestion she had given of her own possibilities.[15] His eclectic approach, selecting doctrines from several sources, can easily be synthesized.

> In the art of elocution, the two great principles are force and grace, the one derived chiefly from nature, the other from art. United, they mutually assist each other; alone each loses a portion of its effectiveness.[16]

Conclusions drawn from this statement which combined the philosophies of Sheridan, Walker, and Rush, added to Murdoch's definition of elocution can definitely be said to have a bearing upon the present-day method of teaching interpretation.

Both teachers and students of present-day interpretation may quickly pass over the name Murdoch without much thought or consideration of a man who was one of the earlier contributors to the art of interpretation as we know it today. His basic idea of employing spoken language to express various states and conditions of the mind remains valid. Whether or not today's teachers give recognition to the terminology and "eclectic" method of writing originated with Murdoch is of little importance, for they are unconsciously using a system which includes principles set forth over one hundred years ago.

Although there have been and will be others who may modify or expand upon the work of a forgotten man in the history of interpretation, no writer will be able to completely sever nature from art and vice-versa in oral communication.

ENDNOTES

[1] Murdoch, A Plea For Broken Language, (Cincinnati, 1883), p. 13.

[2] Rush, The Philosophy of the Human Voice, (Philadelphia, 1827), pp. 30-31.

[3] Murdoch, Analytic Elocution, pp. 10-11.

[4] Ibid., pp. 10-11.

[5] Murdoch, A Plea For Spoken Language, pp. 13-14.

[6] Rush, pp. 437-438.

[7] Murdoch, Analytic Elocution, p. 14.

[8] Lyman S. V. Judson, Andrew T. Weaver, Voice Science (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), p. 177. Murdoch's exercise has validity. According to Judson and Weaver, in Voice Science, the whisper is the basis of speech. Although, "h" is a sound, which can be heard, it cannot be voiced unless it is combined with a vowel; for example: h [ə], hubcap; h [æ], hat.

[9] Russell, Orthophony or the Cultivation of the Voice, (Boston, 1846), pp. 14-15.

[10] Murdoch, Analytic Elocution, p. 17.

[11] John R. Scott, Technic of the Speaking Voice (Columbia, Missouri, 1914). Scott refers to Russell and Murdoch's work as supplying, defining, and exemplifying these essential and generally adopted terms.

[12] Alan H. Monroe, Principles and Types of Speech (Chicago, 1962), p. 93.

[13] Murdoch, A Plea For Spoken Language, p. 205.

[14] Ibid., p. 205.

[15] Ibid., p. 205.

[16] Ibid., p. 206.